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Iran's 'Generation Normal'

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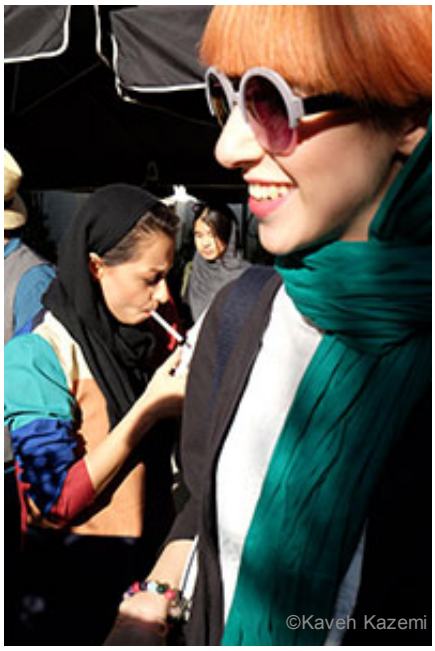
Iranian youth — curious, wired and desperate for normality — are forcing change that horrifies their rulers

Tehran's trendy Mohsen gallery is a magnet for the city's youth, a place where they can let down their guard

It's a warm spring morning in Tehran and I'm in the leafy grounds of the Shahid Beheshti University looking for Iran's future entrepreneurs. Every year, young men and women from all over the country congregate at the ideas fair here to promote their discoveries. Across a hall of exhibition stands, I spot a young man in light jeans and a blue-and-green shirt fiddling with his laptop, computer boards and paintings hanging crookedly on the wall behind him. Mehrdad Naji has made his way to the fair from the city of Isfahan, where he's been working on a little invention: an electronic circuit-board tester for factories. "Testers usually give one set of data; this one is more advanced, it gives the details of the problem," he says, and shows me a video of how his creation works. I'm no expert on electronic circuit-board testers, and I'd be surprised if

this were a huge breakthrough. But as I speak to Mehrdad through a translator, I find this reserved 24-year-old's pride and ambition inspiring.

The child of a middle-class Isfahan family whose parents never finished high school, Mehrdad is completing a masters degree in electrical engineering and is "self-employed" at the same time. "My goal is to be an employer, and I'm learning how to turn from self-employed to entrepreneur." He shows me the book he's reading. It's by the American motivational speaker on entrepreneurship Robert Kiyosaki, translated into Farsi. "I want no borders between countries. Borders hinder progress." Mehrdad's current life is very different from his dream. He lives in the Islamic Republic, which has been a pariah state for much of its existence since the 1979 revolution, consumed by radicalism and in conflict with the west. Mention progress in relation to Iran, and the image that comes up is probably of scientists working on a secret nuclear bomb.



Iranian youth during a photo exhibition in uptown Mohsen art gallery

But that's why Mehrdad closely follows the news and "loves" Mohammad Javad Zarif, the country's foreign minister, who has been negotiating with the US and other powers on a way out of Iran's nuclear dispute. If everything goes to plan — and that's still a big if — a nuclear deal will be reached guaranteeing that Iran's nuclear programme remains peaceful, and Iranians will have a chance to emerge slowly from their imposed loneliness. I ask Mehrdad about what ties him to the Islamic Republic. He says he stopped praying about 10 years ago and lost faith that the goals of the 1979 Islamic revolution could be achieved. "They were good for 1979 — slogans like oil for free, free housing, equality. But for some ideals, we lost quality of life. Iran has become isolated, Iranians aren't known in the world. We're not a reference for progress. The US is. Europe is."

Being Normal

Mehrdad is part of the new generation of Iranians, the real Islamic Republic that is far less Islamic than its rulers want and ambitious in a different way — not through making mischief or muscle flexing, but through higher education, ideas and its people's hunger to be citizens of the world. Curious, wired, and desperate for normality, Iran's youth — under-40s make up 60 per cent of the 80 million-strong population — have been taking the country in a direction that horrifies its rulers. The pace of change among them has been so fast and dramatic, particularly over the past decade, that Iran's sociologists say they are still trying to understand them and Islamic leaders regularly blame the west for corrupting them. In a recent statement, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader and highest authority, hinted at his frustration. "They [the youth] are intellectually exposed to dangerous threats — the ways of corrupting them are many,

there are communications media that can . . . spread a wrong thought or comment. Today the country is not involved in the military war but it is involved in political, economic and security wars — and, above all, the cultural wars."

The social shifts are apparent on the streets and come across in every conversation. The boys and girls of the Islamic Republic watch western television and Iranian expatriate channels beamed from Los Angeles, Washington and London. They spend their lives on social media — Viber is the latest craze, and a forum for jokes about their leaders. According to the ministry of communications' April figures, 20 million Iranians have smartphones. Society is increasingly urbanised (the urban population is now more than 71 per cent, up from 48.7 per cent in 1979). In schools, universities and government institutions, women still cover their hair with the customary black hijab. But elsewhere, many girls barely pay it lip service, and it now comes in all colours and patterns. Some don't even bother tying it around the neck. The manteaux — the jackets that are supposed to conceal their bodies — are tighter and the hems are rising up. Young Iranians admire the US, which they see as an ideal state of freedom and prosperity, however much their rulers bombard them with anti-American slogans.

On a trip to Tehran this month, I met dozens of young people who grew up in Iran and want to be like everyone else around the world — to have a secure job, control over their own destiny and the freedom to dream. There was Hamid, the bazaar trader of accessories who wants to save enough money to "buy" his way out of military service so he can have a passport and follow his favourite singer on tour. On a street corner one early morning, I came across two young men from Lorestan, the western province, who sleep in the parks and wait for construction jobs so they can pay for books and continue their psychology courses at an open university. At a coffee shop, a 22-year-old told me he wants to be a football player and play for AC Milan.

> "It's difficult to explain some aspects of what's going on with youth, because it's a new phenomenon in Iran. The youth are different from 10 years ago," says Hamid-Reza Jalaipour, a professor of sociology at Tehran University. "There is a big diversity: there is religious youth, there is ideological youth, modern youth and postmodern youth who live as if they were in California. Money is important to them, much more than 20 years ago. Individualism is high. They don't live according to what their parents want; they do what they want. Even the women make decisions on their own."
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> Jalaipour relates an event that startled sociologists and confounded Iran's ruling elite. "Six months ago, a popular Iranian singer died and 100,000 young people gathered at

Young Iranians outside a coffee shop near Tehran University

his funeral. But they didn't follow traditional custom, where men and women have to be segregated. They came together, boys and girls, and held hands." There hadn't been such a large gathering since the mass 2009 street protests that ended in bloodshed; nor was there ever such a big public display of anti-traditional culture. For Jalaipour, the funeral suggested a "silent movement" among youth which was defined by a style of life rather than politics, and whose ramifications will not be felt immediately but perhaps in a decade. "The hardliners [in the regime] were very confused."

Girl power

Iran's young women have been a driving force of social change. Empowered by education, which is arguably the most important achievement of the Islamic revolution, they have slowly wrested freedoms from their leaders. The number of university-educated women used to lag far behind that of men but it has caught up, leaping from 4.7 per cent in 1997 to 18.4 per cent in 2012. More educated women are delaying marriage and those who do tie the knot are opting increasingly for divorce. Much to the consternation of the Islamic government, the rate of divorce has been steadily rising, up more than 5 per cent in the past Iranian year that ended in March. The marriage rate, meanwhile, fell 6.5 per cent. The combination of education and economic hardship is also leading to smaller families. Women want fewer children, with average family size slipping to 3.4 now from 4 in 2007. It's even lower, at 3.2, in the capital Tehran.

To understand why, meet Tayebeh, a typical 28-year-old who grew up in a religious family in the town of Chalus in the Mazandaran province on the Caspian Sea. Her father was in the Revolutionary Guard and fought in the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war. Now a married mother of a two-year-old girl and living in Tehran, she feels under less social pressure but is still angry. "I was talented, I wanted to study but things changed — my father died and I had to drop out of university." Though she has a job with a small importer of computer parts, she's afraid she could lose it any day. Even when employed, she can't afford to put her daughter in kindergarten. She tells me she sometimes wonders whether it was wise to get married in the first place. Many of her friends in Chalus are unmarried and don't feel the need to start families. "Marriage just means more restrictions."

> Marriage just means more restrictions
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> - Tayebeh, a 28-year-old married mother
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Sanaz Moradi, a youth counsellor, says one big difference from previous generations is that

young Iranians now feel they can have relationships without being married. "Girls want to be equal, independent, have boyfriends, and their families can't control them. Even living together without being married is becoming normal nowadays." She cites her own family. "My parents were very strict with me: I married 13 years ago and now I'm 34. But my sister is only four years younger than me, she lives on her own in another city and doesn't want to get married, and my parents are fine with that. In four years, their attitude completely changed."

Fun underground

The Mohsen gallery is an escape for young Iranians. The trendy Tehran spot has two exhibition rooms, a café and a patio where girls and boys can let their guard down, kissing when they greet each other, holding hands and smoking at their leisure. I go to see the first exhibition, by a young photography artist enamoured with Tehran landscapes, and I notice a girl with colourful sneakers, bleached hair and a nose piercing, chatting with a group of friends. Nazanin is a 28-year-old graphic designer, who describes herself as an outcast. "When foreigners look at TV they don't see the real Iran. We have the surface society and we have the underground society. We have our parties, we get drunk, nothing is legal. We live like in the west." The morality police, charged with keeping Iranians in line with strict Islamic mores, which essentially means preventing them from having fun, is still active but not much of a bother. "It's more relaxed now but we still have to worry about the police, they can catch you for anything. Of course you can get around them, especially if you have money and you can pay bribes."

Her friend Amir is a 26-year-old with curly hair falling to his shoulders and he too lives underground. He's in a rock band called The Muckers that can't play in public places. "We can't play concerts, we can't sell our music, we just record and put it on YouTube." Iran's Islamic rulers have softened to music, and folk singing and even jazz is tolerated; it's not unusual today to meet young men and women playing guitar and singing in parks. But rock is still taboo. Though Amir doesn't have a job — his dream is to make money making music — he thinks his life is "cool". "You can do what you want here but you have to be underground." Amir would like to move to the US where he can thrive as a musician. That would make him one of the 150,000 people who leave Iran every year, a brain drain that the government has struggled to contain. But it's not easy for Iranians to travel abroad because visas are difficult to obtain. Amir, for example, says the FBI has been checking him out for two years and he has yet to receive clearance for a visa.

Nazanin and Amir are postmodern youth who come from well-to-do families. She makes only $300 a month and so lives with her parents, who pay for "everything"; he makes no money at all. But while a decade ago it was mostly the rich kids who led a westernised life, today most of Iran's youth have, to a certain extent, liberated themselves from the shackles of Islamic social rule. In the second exhibition room at Mohsen gallery, a floor-to-ceiling screen shows black-

and-white snaps of boys in baggy trousers playing basketball, or sitting and smoking, against walls painted with graffiti such as "Tupac, King of Rap" and "Life is Rape". I ask the photographer, 34-year-old Mojtaba Saranjampour, if this is New York. It's in downtown Tehran, he tells me, and the kids, aged 16 to 25, call themselves Sholex. They are like a street gang. They come from poor families, and live on the streets, drinking, smoking (tobacco and hashish) and wasting time. "I followed them for years for an arts project and I was curious about what they represent: an outcast society, separated from the rest, living in a world they made up themselves. They're an aspect of our society no one knows about."

Experts say the situation is similar in other cities, though society is still conservative in rural areas. "Most people have relative social freedom — they have taken it by force from the regime," says Narges Barahoui, a researcher and activist who comes from Baluchistan and travels regularly back home. "The regime got used to women dressing like this. The changes were more extensive than they wanted but it's also like a bargain: if they could they'd stop people in the streets but they know they cannot prevent this trend. They can't do anything because their own children look like us." She points out that the evolution of social freedom continued during eight years of hardline rule by Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad, the radical president. His foreign policy was extremist; his domestic social policy less so.

Invisible links

Iranian youth have played a leading part in the country's modern drama, from the 1979 revolution (it was students who took over the American embassy) to the spasms of protests that have rocked the Islamic Republic since. However hard the regime tried to tame them, through cultural revolutions at schools and universities and repeated purges, they have proved extraordinarily resistant — and resilient. The student unrest that started in 1999 at Tehran University against repression represented the first big domestic shock to the Islamic system. Equally threatening, however, has been the consistent political involvement of youth in bringing more moderate, reformist leaders to the presidency. They were instrumental in rallying behind Mohammad Khatami, the reformist cleric, who was elected president in 1997 and served for two terms. He remains young Iranians' favourite politician. In 2009, many youth joined the reformist Green movement, which fought in vain against the alleged rigging of a presidential election. Despite the brutal repression that year, the youth did not give up. On June 14 2013, they came out in droves to vote for the moderate Hassan Rouhani, knowing that their voice might once again be ignored but determined to show the regime that they remained relevant.

Afra, a 30-year-old civil engineering graduate, was one of those who cast her vote. I meet her with a group of her friends on Revolution Street, around the corner from Tehran University. Afra lost her

Former presidents Mohammad Khatami (left), still young Iranians' favourite politician, and Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad, a hardliner

job at a development company when international sanctions made it difficult for companies to finance projects. She now works for a research company. Life is "mind-boggling", she tells me. "Look at the internet — there's a ban on Twitter and Facebook and we have to use proxy software to access them. But while we feel the ban, the highest-ranking officials have access to them," she explains, referring to both the president and the supreme leader who are hyperactive on social media. "There's a kind of deal, a policy, by which they [the regime] know everything is happening in the country but everything is done secretly. It's not normal." Frustration, however, is not a reason for apathy, she says. "Rouhani's election was a step forward and it was a victory for the youth who forced the regime to accept him as president."

I ask Afra and her friends how they envision Iran changing. Step-by-step reform, they say, not upheaval. One revolution for Iran, they tell me, is enough. "The Islamic revolution made us less developed and we're afraid another one will take us even further backwards," says Hamid, a 25-year-old finishing graduate studies in engineering. "Look at the Arab revolutions," he continues, referring to Syria, Egypt, Libya.

Iranians young and old are also under no illusion about the heavy price of defying the regime: 100 demonstrators were killed in the 2009 unrest and thousands were imprisoned. Mahnaz Mohammadi, a 39-year-old documentary film-maker who took part in the protests and did a stint in jail last year on charges of conspiring against the state, says her friends, even those still behind bars, believe in reforming the Islamic Republic. "In 2009, we gained a voice. Before that, most people outside thought the Iranian people and the government were the same. Now everyone differentiates and that's important for our dignity. But we're not looking for revolution — we know revolution takes you nowhere. Only reform takes us forward." Remember, she tells me, most Iranians' priority is economic wellbeing. Political freedom is the concern of a minority.

Despite the rupture between Iran's youth and the regime, there are links with society that the political elite has been adept at exploiting, whether through a vast patronage network, the religious institutions that cater to the poor or the largely state-owned economy. One of the main gripes you hear in Tehran is that jobs require connections — and the closer you or your family are to the top echelons of the regime, the more likely you will land a good job after university. Narges Barahoui, the activist and researcher from Baluchistan, says that "invisible links" are not to be underestimated. "People demand jobs from the government. They prefer them to private sector jobs because they're safer, more prestigious and with higher salaries. There are also cultural links, especially in the provinces, where Iranians are more religious and

have better relations with the state. And every time a new government comes in, they hire new people, and that creates new links."

Rebels with a lost cause

Ali Jaafar-Abadi is a 36-year-old cleric who picks religious books that young Iranians can browse or buy at a bookstore-café known as a *Basij* hangout. The Basij are the youth militia established by the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic. Fiercely loyal to the current supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, they are an arm of the elite Revolutionary Guard, charged at times with policing morals, used at other times for repression, and often responsible for social work such as running camps where young people help distribute food to poverty-stricken neighbourhoods. The regime says there are about 10 million volunteers and has set a target of 20 million. Iranians say many of the Basij are not hardcore believers but hope to reap benefits such as jobs in linking themselves to a powerful force in the political system.

Young Iranians walk past a mural of a martyr from the Basij youth militia

I ask Jaafar-Abadi why young people devoted to the ideals of the revolution are a minority in today's Iran, their interest in religion and religious governments faded. Like other conservatives I meet, he has a ready answer. "The shape and form of the connection to religion has changed. Before it was face to face, now it's more online," he tells me. "Iranians are fundamentally religious but on the surface, especially in Tehran, you think people are distanced from religion."

In the girls' section of the bookstore I sit with Zahra Karimi, a 22-year-old art student. She's a model of Islamic dress: black chador and a black scarf firmly tied under her chin. She likes to spend time here because it's segregated and smoke-free. Her goal in life, she says, is to "help the Islamic revolution continue". What about a job, a family? "That's part of it but not the higher purpose." She's "100 per cent concerned" that Iranian youth have lost interest in religion and blames satellite channels and social media as well as clothes designers.

In the boys' section, I meet 22-year-old Mohammed and 25-year-old Sadjad, both medical students at Tehran University, and active Basijis. Friendly and even giggly at times, they tell me that being a Basiji is about believing in an idea and "supporting the leader and the country".

Iran has never been a particularly religious country, compared to its neighbours. Since the revolution, Iranians' relationship with religion has been mixed up with their political views of the regime. The strict diktat of conservative clerics has essentially turned the youth against religion. Many say they are believers but not practising.

I ask several of those I meet whether they follow a *marjah*, which means a "source of emulation". (In the Shia Muslim faith, people follow a high-ranking cleric — an ayatollah or grand ayatollah — as spiritual leader. He guides them, when required, on social, legal and sometimes even political matters.) Some of the young people were perplexed by the question, as if they'd never heard of a marjah; others said their parents followed a source of emulation but for them the only reference is the Koran.

Clerics and officials, meanwhile, tell me of a curious recent trend: the most popular marjah these days is Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the most senior Iraqi Shia cleric, who is of Iranian origin. He believes in the quietist approach that separates religion and state, as opposed to *velayat e-faqih*, the clerical system of government enshrined in the Iranian constitution and installed by the late Khomeini, leader of the Islamic revolution. Indeed, many young Iranians are not opposed to clerics per se (Khatami, the hugely popular former president, is a mid-ranking cleric) as much as to the system of government that gives unelected mullahs complete and unaccountable power over society and government. In fact, clerics have given themselves a bad name because they have involved themselves in politics, corruption and repression. As Tayebeh, the young mother from Chalus says: "Religion has become a tool in some people's hands. If you want to hide bad deeds you need religion to do it . . . You hide behind religion."

> Clerics turned the youth against religion. Many believe but don't practise
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I meet up with a former senior official who I have known for a long time to ask him about the social changes in Iran's youth culture and what they mean for the country.

The way to look at Iran today, he tells me, is to understand that it has become a "post-revolutionary" society. "On the surface, you still see the colour of revolution but, beneath that, society has been changed. People benefit from the dignity and independence the revolution brought but they abandoned extremism and the fever of the revolution and merged with the world. They're swimming in the direction of the river," he explains. That direction is normality.

"Normality hasn't been practised in Iran," says the official. "The new generation understand they need to have a normal life."

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Photographs: Kaveh Kazemi; Getty